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**APPROACHING FOR EMPOWERMENT OF
WOMEN THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ:
A HALF WAY INITIATIVE**

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INTRODUCTION

In India, women have been largely deprived in availing the opportunities of socio-economic development, active participation in different activities, availing educational facilities and various development programmes linked with bringing improvement in the life-style and quality of life, due to several social and cultural backwardness system prevailing in our social settings. Besides this, women are denied the rights in decision making process for various matters and affairs of the family on account of the continuation of traditional system of civilisation. Restrictions are also imposed in the participation of women in certain social and cultural programmes and to move outside households for certain purposes, mainly in rural areas. Thus the traditional form of society is seen keeping open different types of opportunities largely for their male family members while the women are marginalised even after the completion of fifty years of Independence. In fact the women are seriously exploited by men for certain purposes although most household related work are performed by women. Disadvantages against women are also commonly practised in finding employment opportunities on account of the socio-cultural constraints imposed by households and discrimination practised by the employers. The restrictions imposed against women in utilising own rights independently and social compulsion to make movements only for certain distances also impose limitations in availing the opportunity of gainful employment of women.

THE PAST INITIATIVES AND THE OUTCOME

In view of bringing improvements in the socio-economic status of women several initiatives have been undertaken under different planned development strategies to maximise the participation of women in different development programmes in the past. Special efforts have also been carried out to bring women in educational system with the notion that imparting education among women will certainly bring awareness about their rights, social status and will maximise their participation in different categories of remunerative occupations of employment.

The Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the constitution have a special bearing on the status and empowerment of women. The constitution guarantees political equality to women through the institution of adult franchise. This recognition was certainly a radical departure from socio-cultural norms of the traditional Indian society. In the past various legal reforms were, therefore, initiated to improve the status of women in the typical Indian social system and to strengthen the women's empowerment. Some of the important reforms in this direction were Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, Dowry Prohibition Act and the Maternity Benefit Act.

In addition to efforts undertaken during different plan periods to maximise the participation of women in different development programmes in the past a chapter on women and development was also included in the Sixth Plan, introducing women specific and related programmes which can directly bring improvements in the socio-economic condition of women. Under the National Perspective Plan for Women, provisions were made to maximise the participation of women in ongoing IRDP and related development programmes introduced at providing self-employment opportunities. During this plan, a Indira Mahila Yojana was introduced and a Rashtriya Mahila Kosh established to encourage women to hold their saving's account and funds for productive activities.

The outcome of different initiatives and act introduced for the welfare and the upliftment of women's socio-economic status has been that the participation of women in the availment of different levels of educational systems, occupations available in different economic sectors, areas related to politics, social activities and various development programmes have been certainly increased at significant level but they are still lagging far behind to men in availing certain opportunities. The problems related to lack of awareness and lesser mobility among a large segment of rural women population living in backward and remote areas under the subjugation of men, social and cultural boundations restricting them to remain within the household, have limited the scope of increasing participation of women in various activities and programmes.

Considering into account the unsatisfactory progress that has achieved in bringing improvements in the socio-economic status of women, particularly in rural areas, it has been felt that the increasing participation of rural women in local level political system and decision making process would be certainly an important instrumental measure to bring favourable changes in their socio-economic status. It is believed that political partnership can be considered to include women's involvement in any form of organization and organised activity that seeks to influence the attitude and behaviour as a result of their active partnership in decision making processes. It is also believed that the efforts undertaken for empowerment of women in the past suffered due to nexus of traditional factors of castes, class, religion, feudal and family status, which are essentially patriarchal forces that work in favour of men against women. Even in voting for any election the rights of women for voting are restricted resulting that their turn out is much less than men due to pressure from family and society. Equally important factor in this regard is lack of awareness among women regarding the importance and rights of their casting votes.

WOMEN AND PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

In the recently introduced Panchayati Raj System, the policy for reservation in favour of women has, therefore, been thought an important approach to maximise the participation of women in public mainstream, local level political system and decision making process for certain development programmes and activities at the level of village Panchayats. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj System could be considered as an important policy approach regarding minimising the traditional feelings of people about the status of women in our society in terms of providing discriminatory treatment against women for availing certain opportunities. Reservation of two-third seats for women in all three-tiers of Panchayats would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities and development programmes, bringing closeness in mutual understanding, status and role to play in the household and the activities performed outside household and different decision making process of the family among men and women. This would also develop an understanding among women regarding their duties and rights about the national welfare and its integrity along with their male counterpart.

However, the level of success of providing reservation for women in Panchayati Raj System would more specifically depend upon its implementation pattern, flexibility and approaches maintained in its implementation criteria based on region/area specific social and cultural elements and prevailing conditions, level of awareness of the realities and objectives of the policy to different socio-economic and caste groups of women. Besides this the factors such as socio-economic, cultural, political and family background on one hand and personal characteristics of elected women representatives of village panchayats are equally important elements for achieving the level of success of the introduced policy intervention.

THE OBJECTIVES

The study based on a sample of 12 woman pradhans and 20 woman members selected in Kapkote Block Panchayat of district Almora in U.P. attempted to examine various issues related to the participation of women in the activities of Panchayats rural development programmes, social reform activities and in decision making processes of various development programmes at the meetings of Block Panchayats and village Panchayats. It also attempted to assess the extent and level of changes that have been occurred in the socio-economic status and empowerment of selected women pradhans and the members of selected village panchayats.

THE ASSUMPTIONS

It was the understanding that the provision of reservation policy as introduced for women in Panchayati Raj Act for maximising the participation of women in local level political system, governance, decision making process would certainly bring successful changes in improving socio-economic status and empowering women atleast in Uttarakhand. Because the participation of women in various social, economic, political, cultural and local level activities had been quite appreciable since a long period in different areas of the region. In fact, a large proportions of the women have been actively associated with different economic and social movements, including the well recognised movement for statehood, were organised in the region during the past. In fact the domination of women have been well recognised in different economic activities and in maintaining traditional social systems and cultural values of the region due to high incidence of migration of male family members outside Uttarakhand. Also, the literacy rates of women has been significantly much higher in the region than the national average for last several centuries.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND BACKGROUND

All the women pradhans were married and were concentrated in the age group of 25 to 35 years. By virtue of greater emphasis provided in the expansion of various level of education facilities in the sample district during the recent past a majority of Pradhan had secondary level of education, in fact two of them were graduates. One woman Pradhan having secondary level education had earlier been associated with Yavak Mangal Dal and had the background of participation in local level agitations and movements. Surprisingly, over 60 per cent of the elected Pradhans were the relatives and family members of the people who had represented the Gram Sabha and Nyaya Panchayats in the past while remaining pradhans were the wives of people engaged in business activity or working as contractors or teachers. Most Pradhan had strong economic background though, agriculture was the main family occupation but the contribution of income generated through other than agricultural activities and occupations, was much higher than the income earned from agriculttrue in the total income of the households. Almost the woman Pradhans were motivated to contest election by their family members, particularly male members, but only one of them had taken the initiative herself and then consulted the head of the family in this regard. Further, the woman members were also quite young by their age and half of them had below secondary level of education, 30 per cent were illiterate and remaining were just literate. Both woman Pradhans as well as members were engaged in agricultural activities before associating themselves with the PRI's.

PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

The Woman Pradhans as well as woman members were found very regular in attending meetings organised at Block Panchayat level. But most of them are generally accompanied by their male family member in reaching block office. In fact the most women members have been receiving remarkable assistance from their male family members in getting sanction of the development projects, grants from different government offices including Block Panchayats, for performing various welfare activities

in their concerned PRI's. The participation of women Pradhan in the discussions on various issues, including decision making process had been reported very poor by the Block Chief. The issues for discussions in the meetings were mainly raised by the Block Pramukh and the male Pradhans.

The women Pradhans were also observed hardly organising any meeting regularly at village Panchayat level. Most of the Pradhans had reported that they do not realise any importance of holding meetings frequently because of limited numbers of development programmes are generally allocated by the Block Panchayat to them. Most PRI's were engaged in carrying out Jawahar Rojgar Yojana only. In the past meetings, the gathering of general public and the attendance of PRI's members was reported to be quite satisfactory. However, the women members were reported hardly participate in the several issues of discussions, but the domination of male members and the individuals who had been associated in the past Gram Sabhas had been significantly much appreciable. The Women Pradhans had reported that generally, the male members of the village Panchayats show negative attitude and non-co-operative behaviour in initiating and finalisation of development project proposals.

PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAMMES IMPLEMENTATION

The participation of women Pradhans in the implementation of various schemes and development programmes was found quite dissatisfactory in the sense that most activities undertaken under various schemes in the past have been managing and implemented by the male family members or the husband of the woman Pradhan. Several doubts were also raised in mind regarding who signs on the payments made to the beneficiaries of the concerned schemes. Enquiring from the beneficiaries covered under the JRY schemes we found that the payments are made by the concerned male members who is engaged in supervising the scheme. Among the sample Pradhan, only two of them were found occasionally engaged in supervision and implementation of JRY scheme. In several cases it was noted that performing any development programme has been the responsibility of all family members of women Pradhans rather than the women

Pradhan alone or the village Panchayat. In general, the women members is consulted by Pradhans for approving the various development proposals which are to be forwarded to the Block Panchayat or the District Development Office for its final approval and requesting for financial grants. However, the implementation part of different development activities and programmes in most village Panchayats is independently undertaken by the Pradhans with the association of her main followers and family members without the involvement of any women members of the respective village panchayat.

It has been general practice that the male members and people associated with the last gram sabha mainly propose undertaking certain programmes and development activities in the meetings of village Panchayats. In fact, the domination of male members in different kinds of panchayat activities and meetings is well recognised in almost the panchayats. However, in 20 per cent of sample village panchayats the women pradhans have been remarkably dominating in the several issues raised for discussions and in the decision making process such as in the identification and selection of beneficiaries and different development work to be proposed for undertaking in the concerned village panchayats. Lack of knowledge about the functioning and procedures of holding meetings, prevailing backward traditional social and cultural system which restrict women to speak freely before their elder male family members and relatives, lack of previous experience in attending male dominated large meetings and several related problems might be prohibiting the effective participation of women in several issues of discussions and the decision making process at policy level of the village panchayat.

CHANGES IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STATUS

So far, marginal changes in the socio-economic status and life style of both women pradhans and women members has been experienced. Since, four of the sample woman pradhans and almost all the members of different village panchayats had informed that they do not find any changes and improvements in their social and personal life style, association with any political system, status at household level

activities or any society level work pattern, routine of family work after associating themselves with the PRI's. No significant changes has also been experienced by the women members in getting respect from the village people within the village level activities. However, all Pradhan receive honourable treatment in the social functions, religious activities and local level functions by both men and women population of the respective village Panchayats. But three women Pradhans have found the opportunity to become the member of different regional political parties, attending the local level meetings of political parties, NGO's, Yuvak Mangal Dal and various other social organisations. As many as 16.67 per cent of the Women Pradhans had already achieved good reputation and had provided honourable place in the local areas before heading the concerned village Panchayats. Now they have gained additional reputation and opportunity to mobilise the support of a larger segment of population for performing any desired social welfare activity in successful manner. Two of these woman Pradhans had reported that they regularly keep contracts, and frequently enquires about the kind of difficulty and problems facing by different groups of population in properly functioning of their domestic activity or in matter with the expectation to maximise the support of local people. However, remaining 55 per cent woman Pradhans had been availing the additional opportunity of participating only in social functions such as marriage, religious activities and related village level social activities, other wise they do not reported any improvements that have been occurred in their socio-economic conditions and attachment with any political systems or social organisations after electing as the Pradhan.

PERCEPTION ON EMPOWERING WOMEN

Enquiring about the individual perceptions of woman Pradhans and members regarding their acceptation about the implications of introducing reservation policy under the Panchayati Raj System. Over achieving the goal of bringing improvements in socio-economic status and empowering women it revealed that over three fourth of the sample women had very optimistic views that the concerned policy intervention would not only provide opportunities of strengthening empowerment of women but several

traditional social and cultural systems prevailing with disfavouring women's opportunities on certain aspects would be removed satisfactorily in the future. They expressed, the outcome of this policy initiative can not be evaluated and realised only after this shorter duration of one year of the introduction of Panchayati Raj System in Uttarakhand. In fact a large number of women Pradhans were not well aware about the provisions of their rights and duties and the methodology of functioning of the village Panchayats.

However, it was very unfortunate for many of the women Pradhans that they have never received the opportunity of participating in the large meetings or gathering of the people in the past. This has been limiting the scope of a majority of women Pradhans to develop their individual confidence of participating in discussions and decision making processes in the meetings. It was believed that with the frequently holding of meetings at Block and Village Panchayat level and strengthening the participation of women in such meetings would definitely enhance the increasing confidence among them to participate in the discussions, particularly in matters and issues related to policy decision making processes and present their views before the meetings for discussions.

In this regard, the women representatives of block and village Panchayat had recommended and suggested that frequently organising of meetings independently for women representatives of different village Panchayats could be a instrumental measure for maximising the domination of women in various issues of discussions, and developing confidance in boldly presenting their views in the meetings . The women Pradhans, those have sufficiently developed self confidence and acquired skill and art of participating in discussions and in expressing personal view in meetings which they have fortunately gained through attending several social and political meetings in the past, can play a crucial role in this regard. This process will not only help in strengthening the participation of women in various issues of discussions and policy finalisation but it will also be important measure for improving social status and empowering them in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been universally well recognised that the women are the backbone of the region in terms of the role they have been playing in the development and bringing prosperity of Uttarakhand for the past several generations. The domination of women in different household and outside household level activities, population, workforce, economic development, protection of local environment is quite evident in almost the mountain areas of the region. Unprecedentedly increasing involvement and participation of women in local level agitations and regional movements and agitations which were organised for imposition ban on opening wine shops in the region, environmental and economic movements, widely known as Chipko movement against increasing deforestation and degradation of mountain environment, and on going political movement in favour of the creation of separate Uttarakhand state are the examples which prove the level of awareness existing among women. Even the proportion of literate women is significantly much higher in Uttarakhand than the national average.

In such emerging ground level situation and the kind of role that women playing in certain aspects in the region it was well expected that the objective of introducing reservation policy for women in Panchayati Raj System would be a most importance and an instrumental measure of state intervention in bringing improvements in socio-economic conditions and thus empowering women, at least in Uttarakhand. However, the present study revealed that both woman Pradhans and women member are hardly participating in various issues of discussions, decision making process and in policy finalisation of development programmes in the meetings organised at Block Panchayat and village Panchayat level. Lack of involvement of women pradhans in the implementation monitoring and supervision of development programmes and schemes was also well reflected in most of the village Panchayats. Instead, all the Panchayat related activities and implementation of all development schemes are performed by their male members. In such a situation of overall control of male family members over the Panchayat related activities, performing duties and personnel freedom of women

Pradhan the possibility of bringing improvements in socio-economic status and empowering women seems to be a difficult task.

The objective of empowering women in Uttarakhand could have been more successful if the identification of village Panchayats for the reservation of women Pradhans and locations/constituencies within the village Panchayats for women members should have been done considering into account the local conditions in terms of area specific geographical topographical and accessibility situation rather than the extension of same criteria and procedure adopted in this regard in the plan areas of state. Besides this, villages having the availability of well educated women and past experiences of active participation in different social, economic and political movements should have been purposely identified as reserved village Panchayats for Woman Pradhans atleast this initial stages of the introduction of Panchayati Raj System. Providing opportunity to such categories of women in heading the village Panchayats at the initial stages of the introduction of Panchayati Raj System could have been instrumental in planning for improving socio-economic status and empowering women. This is so because they can strongly raise the issues related to the betterment of women in the meetings and can play a dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendations for the inclusion of such development programmes which can favourably improve the status of the women.

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